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ABSTRACT

Although the best teaching strategy would seem to be that which builds on existing student values and skills, actual classroom practice falls short of this ideal because, among other reasons, the teacher is not likely to understand the student's viewpoint when it is outside his own experience. The teacher who, however, wants to capitalize on the verbal and cultural resources which students bring to the classroom must elicit language from the students, getting them to talk in such a way that they reveal not merely their interests but something about the linguistic and social systems within which they operate as well. This document presents a set of questions which provide the teacher with guidelines for interpreting the information thus elicited from students. Questions concentrate on the ways in which the language and culture of a student may be different from that represented in teaching materials. The following topics are covered in this preliminary version: giving and receiving directions for travel, telling time, assuming responsibility, internalizing syntax, and manipulating count and mass nouns. Many of the questions can be used by teachers in any subject area, and many are applicable for students at a variety of age levels. (FWB)

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PRELIMINARY DRAFT

SOME GUIDELINES FOR DETERMINING THE STUDENT'S POINT OF VIEW

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SOME GUIDELINES FOR DETERMINING THE STUDENT'S POINT OF VIEW

A recurring educational theory is that the teacher who can incorporate the world view of his students into classroom procedures is both more humane and more likely to be successful. This incorporation involves more than beginning with materials directly related to the student's past experience. It also involves capitalizing on the student's values, talents, and cultural resources. Most people would undoubtedly agree that we should avoid techniques and materials which downgrade the student's point of view or present features which are aversive to it. Again, most of us would agree that the frequent ineffectiveness of these techniques should be an additional reason for not using them. However, there seem to be times when their use is unavoidable, when there are apparently no alternatives.

Common sense would seem to indicate that a teaching strategy which builds on existing values and on skills developed as a result of these values would be the one most likely to succeed. However, actual classroom practices do not always seem to coincide with this theory. We often find that little attempt is being made to accommodate the students' point of view, except in those classes where the values, aspirations, and learning styles of the students are already in harmony with existing techniques and materials. There are probably two reasons for this: first, that the teacher is quite legitimately a representative

of the educational establishment, and second, that the teacher is not likely to understand the student's viewpoint when it is outside of his own experience.

In the first instance, the way in which a teacher chooses to utilize the values and skills of his students will largely depend on how the teacher has defined his own role. To what extent can he give official recognition to the student's wishes as a legitimate parts of classroom procedure? To what extent can he do this as a temporary means of achieving a different goal? To what extent would this be abject surrender? It is probable that a teacher's formulation of his own role is a continuous, largely unconscious process.

This process is certainly influenced both positively and negatively by a variety of factors, among them his own upbringing, his training and experience, administrators, fellow teachers, students, and the parents and community representatives with whom he comes in contact. How the teacher defines his role will probably also determine, at least in part, the importance he attaches to his own understanding of the way in which his students organize their worlds and the degree to which he believes he is handicapped in making such an evaluation.

The sets of questions that follow are designed for teachers who are willing to devote considerable time to understanding the life-styles of their students better. Because these questions are designed primarily for English and language arts teachers, they focus

on the ways in which the language and culture of a student can be different from that represented in textbooks and other teaching materials. Some of the questions can be used by teachers in any subject area. Many can be used with a variety of age levels.

The teacher who <u>wishes</u> to capitalize on the verbal and cultural resources which students bring to the classroom has two initial tasks. The first is to elicit language from the students, getting them to talk in such a way that they reveal, not merely their interests, but something about the linguistic and social systems within which they operate. This is the easier task to delineate, although its skillful execution is admittedly an art. Lists of the kinds of pictures, objects, and topics that are likely to appeal to various age groups and ethnic backgrounds can be easily compiled when not already available. The second task is that of organizaing the raw data, gathered through language elicitation, by utilizing some sort of structure to sift out and categorise what might be significant in a given context.

In this regard, it is probably not only impractical to expect to train teachers as linguists and anthropologists, but undesirable as well. When linguists and anthropologists actually become involved in field work, their chief tools are those components of their own experiences, primary and secondary, which permits them to make some educated guesses about the framework into which they can fit the raw data they find. In other words, their training and experience gives them a better chance of following the right hunches. Now teachers

through experience, if not through training, are likely to become experts at interpreting behavior. When an experienced, competent teacher misinterprets what is happening, as all of us will on occasion, either his definition of his role precludes the possibility of the most likely interpretation, or the dynamics involved are so marginal to his own experience that he dismisses them as unlikely. That is he does not accept a given interpretation of student behavior. Either it conflicts with his notion of what a teacher should consider important, or this particular interpretation does not occur to him because there is nothing in his experience to suggest it. The purpose of these question is to suggest alternate systems of organization in various areas. While the final version will attempt to be comprehensive, this version will only cover the following topics: giving and receiving directions for travel, telling time, assuming responsibilities, internalizing syntax and manipulating count and mass nouns.

past the drug store, turn toward the park, and walk for about ten minutes?"

C. What responses does he consider appropriate?

1. Under what circumstances will he volunteer directions?

2. Under what circumstances will he ask another person to clarify directions given?

3. Is the students' response or lack of response idiosyncratic or part of a cultural pattern?

For example; a teacher or a stranger might ask a group of children where someplace is, and the children might hesitate to answer because they feel they would be unable to explain where the place is in terms appropriate to the situation.

D. If he is put in a situation in which he cannot use his customary forms how does he adapt?

For example; how does a person accustomed to a city laid out in blocks running north south, east and west adjust to a city like Washington where diagonal streets cross each other? Or how does a rural child from Appalachia adjust to the city streets of Chicago?

1. GIVING AND RECEIVING DIRECTIONS FOR TRAVEL

In every society, people must develop techniques for giving and receiving directions for travel. This includes small children who would not be able to find their way around the house or neighborhood without some sense of direction. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suppose that all people develop both concepts concerning their own position in spatial relationships and the ability to express these concepts verbally. The student's means of expression may be quite different from those of the teacher's or those used in the textbooks, as well as his sense of what is an appropriate response.

A. How does a person give directions?

1. Does he use left and right? Points of the compass? (north and south)?

2. If he uses landmarks, what sort are they? Trees and bushes? Rocks? Mountains? The flow of a river (upstream, downstream)? Statues? Playgrounds? Trash cans? Buildings? If buildings, are they defined by title (the A&P)? Function (the drug store)? Size? Color?

3. How does he measure distance? In Blocks? Miles? Minutes? Hours? Traffic lights?

For example; would you know where the drug store, located four traffic lights east of the Norway maple, (Maple), is?

B. What does he do when given direction in a form with which he is not comfortable? Does he convert left and right to points of the compass, or vice versa? Miles to minutes? Points of the compass to landmarks?

For example; if told to "Go north for two blocks, turn left, and travel west for about a quarter of a mile," would he convert this to "Go a block

II. TELLING TIME

While the kind of time read from a clock is related to a person's sense of time, it is often far removed from the dynamics of how that sense of time develops. People probably develop a sense of time both in terms of what is likely to precede or follow a given event and in terms of how much time a given event takes. This developmental process begins before children learn to read a clock and may never be closely integrated with concepts of minutes and hours.

A. How does a person know when the major segments of the day occur if he doesn't look at the clock?

1. How does he know when to get up?

2. How does he know when to go to school or work?

3. How does he know when it's almost time for lunch? Almost time for recess? Almost time to go home?

4. If he eats meals on a regular schedule, how does he know when it's time to eat?

> For example, a child might wake up with the sun, except in the winter when another member of his family might wake him up, leave for school shortly after his older brother, and know when it's almost time for recess because that's when he usually gives up on his arithmetic, as well as the time when the teacher puts new notices on the bulletin board.

B. How does a person know when it's time for an event which doesn't happen every day?

1. How does he know when it's almost time to turn on his favorite Friday night television show? When it's almost time for his club meeting? For the girls to get out of junior high school?

For example, he might know that the lady next door goes to work a short while before the Friday night TV progran begins.

2. How does he know that he will probably be sent on an errand when he gets home? Furthermore, how does he know that if he walks two blocks out of his way on the way home (for example) he will arrive too late for run the errand?

3. How does he know when to arrive at a social event?

For example, when an event has a scheduled time to begin, is a person expected to arrive on schedule, 10 minutes later, 20 minutes later, or 1 hour later? If the event has no officially scheduled time to begin (i.e. a gathering in the street or playground) how does he know when it will begin and when he should arrive?

C. How does a person know how much time a given event will take?

1. If he is operating on the basis of a habitual "inner clock," what past experiences have conditioned this sense of time?

2. If he is estimating the time a new experience will take, what past experience is he using as a yardstick?

For example, if a person rides a regular bus route day after day, his "inner clock" will become accustomed to this segment of time, even to the extent of his being able to fall asleep and wake up in time to get off at the regular stop. When this same person rides a bus to an unfamiliar stop, he will estimate the time involved in terms of past experience.

III. ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY

All people develop definitions about appropriate roles, both for themselves and for others. Notions about the sorts of responsibilities assumed by children of various ages play a central part in the development of these definitions. A task considered appropriate only for adults in one society might be performed by teenagers in another. In a third, it might be performed by ten year olds who will no longer be burdened with it when they reach their teens. Tasks appropriate for males in one society, may be performed by females in another and by both groups in a third. When a person with one set of cultural patterns is exposed to people with a different set, his sense of what is appropriate may prevent him from seeing any system at all in the ways of the other group. Seemingly, this has been the basis for some of the writings about "the disadvantaged" or "the culturally deprived" in which the authors have assumed that the people they were writing about either lived haphazard, disorganized lives-with little or no system, or exhibited "deviant" behavior.

A. At what age(s) are children expected to assume responsibilities? At what age(s) are they exempt (or partially exempt)?

Some children may be allowed to remain relatively free of responsibilites until they reach school age or beyond, while others may become responsible for watching over younger children by the time they are four. Adolescence may be a time when responsibilities sharply increase or a time when they are temporarily auspended.

B. When children are considered ready to begin accepting responsibilities, how much time are they given in which to refine the related skills and disciplines?

> One group may be extremely permissive with its young, but expect a sharp transition at school age, while another may place restrictions on children much earlier, but not expect basic self-discipline until later than the first group.

C. What are children of various ages expected to do? Watch younger children? Feed and dress younger children? Care for pets? Pay the phone bill (with money provided by an adult in the household)? Shop for groceries?

> In some communities, a child of eight or ten might be entrusted with the money to pay the phone bill on the way home from school. In others this task might never be considered appropriate for any one but an adult.

D. What kinds of sex differentiations are there ? Who prepares meals? Tends children? Work in the yard (if there is a yard)? Plays ball? Goes to the store for milk?

IV. INTERNALIZING SYNTAX

The processes through which we learn our native language are largely unconscious. In fact, no one has been able to determine to what extent language learning capacities are a part of our human heritage and to what extent they are influenced by environmental factors. All children, unless they have severe physical handicaps, grow up speaking the language and the dialect of the community in which they live. Later, in school, they may learn grammatical "rules". The accuracy of these "rules" will depend on the skill of the grammarians who formulated them. In no case are these "rules" as complete as the set of "rules" which the speaker of a language carries around in his nervous system. If this were not so, speakers of English, who can instantly recognize a foreigner's misuse of _the_, would be able to formulate a rule for its use.

When a person learns a new language, he filters the new system through the one he already has, frequently altering the pronunciation and the grammar. Similarly when the speaker of one dialect listens to the speaker of another dialect, he filters it through the system that he already knows. However, the misunderstandings that arise between speakers of different dialects are frequently more difficult to detect than those arising between speakers of different languages because the dialects are mutually intelligible by in large. One speaker "translates" what the other says, frequently mistranslating. These mistranslations occur because a speaker adds items from his own dialect which are not in the original, omits significant items from the original, or assigns an interpretation which is accurate for him but not for the other speaker.

Some of the difficulties a person encounters with a new language can be described as underdifferentiation or overdifferentiation. Overdifferentiation occurs when a single item in language or dialect A is divided into several catagories in language or dialect B. This

problem is complicated when dialect boundaries are crossed because the same vocabulary may represent items in unrelated categories. What clue will the unsuspecting White person have that will lead him to suspect that a "grey cat" is a White man. Underdifferentiation occurs when several items in one language or dialect coalesce in another one, as in he's gone, which can mean either he is gone, he was gone, or he has gone.

These terms are not being used to imply that any language or dialect makes too many or too few distinctions, but rather to describe the processes that a speaker of one must use in interpreting another.

A. How does the student's verb system operate? (It is doubtful that any teacher, or any linguist for that matter, would be able to answer this question completely.)

1. Are there instances which might be considered over-differentiated when compared with SE (Standard English)?

   For instance, a Standard speaker hearing the utterance he be late is likely to interpret this as he will be late or he would be late, ignoring other possibilities open to some Black speakers - such as (sometimes) he be late or he be late (most every day).

2. Are there instances which might be considered under-differentiation or coalescence when compared with SE?

   A speaker of a different dialect might equate I ain't do nothing with I'm not doing anything or I wasn't doing anything, but perhaps not with both.

3. What sort of a modal system does the student have? (Modals are items such as: can, will, would, might, used to, etc.) Are the differences between his system and SE caused by the rate at which a child acquires syntax or by distinctive patterns in the speech of the adults in his community?

B. In addition to distinctive verb systems, there are distinctive noun systems, (including different ways of marking plurals and possessives), and pronominal apposition (My sister, she a cashier), and the like. There are also equational sentences (Mr. Smith late today.), distinctive forms of negation (Ain't nobody don't got none.), distinctive prepositional relationships (Behind this weather I'm going to the mountains.), and distinctive relationships between SE <u>if</u> and embedded questions (I asked Mary do she know how to do the problems?).

V. MANIPULATING COUNT AND MASS NOUNS

A system of count (or countable) and mass nouns exists in the standard dialects of English and in many of the non-standard dialects. In the remaining non-standard dialects the systems are somewhat distinctive. In Standard English, singular count nouns can be preceded by a or an (a cat, an orange), while plural count nouns can be preceded by all the cardinal numbers except one (two cats, three oranges). Mass nouns can only be counted when preceded by a "counter" (a bar or soap, two pieces of paper, three glasses of milk). There are other restrictions, particularly on premodifiers. Only mass nouns and plural count nouns can occur with no premodifiers. Theoretically any English noun may function as both count and mass, but in actual usage most nouns tend to fall into one category or the other.

This section is not so much designed to assist the teacher in determining regional or social variations in the count and mass noun system, since these variations are likely to be marginal, as it is in helping the teacher become increasingly aware of the classificatory resources the student is utilizing.

A. What sorts of terms are usually considered count nouns? Cats? Dogs? Trees? Men? Oceans? Rivers?

B. What sort are usually considered mass nouns? Chalk? Sand? Milk? Meat? Corn? Rice? Water?

C. What sort frequently fit into both categories? Food? War? Beer? Soda?

For example, it is possible to buy a beer in many locations, but to buy a bread in only a few. "Buying a soda" is an ambiguous

statement in some locations.

D. What sorts of counters precede mass nouns? How many things are measured in pieces? In hunks? In wads? In bottles or cartons? In cups? In glasses?

Some children will ask for a glass of water and some for a cup. Chewing gum can come in pieces, hunks, or wads.

E. How literal are quantitive measures? Is a dozen always twelve? Is a pound always sixteen ounces?

F. Can quantifiers such as a lot of be placed in front of both count and mass nouns? In dialects where speakers do not use plural inflections when the premodifiers indicate plurality, do the two classes of nouns coalesce or does the context usually disambiguate statements?

For example, if one speaker says, "a lot of meat, and "a lot of pencils," while another says, " a lot of meat," and "a lot of pencil," have the two classes merged for the second speaker or will something else that he says or does clarify the situation?